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The Royal Canadian Mounted Police's 2014 report, "Missing and Murdered Aboriginal Women: A National Operational Overview" states that, between the period of 1980 and 2012, the number of police-recorded incidents of Aboriginal female homicides and unresolved missing Aboriginal women and girls totalled 1181: 164 missing and 1017 homicide victims (3). While Canadian police and public officials are well aware of the racist and sexist patterns of violence that disproportionately affect Indigenous women, government response has been astonishingly out of sync with the scale and severity of this epidemic (Amnesty International Solutions). Violence against Indigenous women, however, is an epidemic that expands far beyond Canadian borders. According to the Indian Law Resource Center, Indigenous women are murdered 10 times the national American rate. Further, 1 out of 3 Indigenous women will be raped in her lifetime and 3 out of 5 physically assaulted (1).

In his poem "To the Indigenous Woman," Osage author Thomas Ryan RedCorn explores the issue of violence against Indigenous women using both spoken word and film. He does this by first apologizing to Indigenous women for the violence committed against them and thereby explicitly accepts responsibility for it, then discussing the various ways by which Indigenous women experience violence, and ends with calling his audience to do something about the patterns of violence that plague the lives of Indigenous women. An incongruity, however, seems to exist between the words of RedCorn's poem and its accompanying film—the film works in one way while the words imply otherwise. That is, the film depicts mainly women as if to highlight their power, strength, and resilience as well as their ability to support and protect each other. The poem, though, espouses a different tone that suggests women need men to protect them.

Therefore, in this essay, I examine the various ways that RedCorn employs both poetry and film as a powerful tool of activism through which to raise awareness about violence committed against Indigenous women while simultaneously urging the public to advocate for change. I suggest that, in doing so, RedCorn, perhaps unintentionally, reinforces paternalistic ideology that suggests women need to be saved by men. I also propose that RedCorn discusses Indigenous women solely in terms of their relation to men to the effect that the women he references in "To the Indigenous Woman" fail to emerge as autonomous beings; instead they remain victims rather than emerge as survivors. In this essay, I argue that RedCorn combines the long history of oral traditions with contemporary poetic traditions, both of which Indigenous women have used and continue to use as coping mechanisms and sites of resistance, to discuss violence

committed against Indigenous women. By doing so, however, RedCorn offers a re-presentation¹ of Indigenous women that implicitly reduces their agency and autonomy.

In describing the poetry of Indigenous North American women, Koyangk'auwi Maidu writer and scholar Janice Gould writes,

Our poetry, as story and record, is part of the fabric of oral tradition, transliterated finally into rhythms, structures, and techniques of contemporary verse. It is woven out of the stories we tell one another, sometimes in tears, sometimes in rage, stories recollected, envisioned and breathed into existence. (797-798)

For Indigenous women, then, poetry acts as a cultural emblem through which they recount their traditions and histories. As a result, Indigenous women are able to work through their pain, anger, and trauma—which were and are undoubtedly caused by colonization—and reclaim, at the very least, their stolen voices. In these ways, Indigenous women's poetry functions as a political tool of resistance, which is a form of activism in and of itself. What is unique about "To the Indigenous Woman," then, is the way in which it appears to do precisely what Gould asserts that poetry written by Indigenous North American women does, yet its author is an Indigenous man. Therefore, for contextualization purposes, it is worthwhile to briefly discuss Thomas Ryan RedCorn and his work.

Thomas Ryan RedCorn is from the Osage Nation and currently resides in Pawhuska, Oklahoma. He is a graphic designer, photographer, and member of The 1491s. The 1491s, a comedy group based in Minnesota and Oklahoma, is made up of five Indigenous men who employ satire and jesting humour to discuss social issues such as stereotypes and racism, tribal politics, and the conflict between tradition and modernity. For example, in their short skit "More Indianer than You," the 1491s open with Thomas Ryan RedCorn saying "You know, uh, anything Indians can do White people can do better right?" He, acting as a White man, and another member of The 1491s, who plays an Indigenous man, proceed to test this theory with a number of competitions that include playing drums, wearing traditional dress, and having sex. At the end of the skit, however, RedCorn emerges victorious and thereby "more Indianer" than the Indigenous man. Though the skit appears to be purely comical in nature, a closer analysis reveals its covert political message: cultural appropriation. RedCorn, in the guise of a White man, appropriates cultural property—such as jewelry, musical instruments, and dress—and attempts to "do them better" than members of the culture

¹ In Gayatri Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" she distinguishes between two senses of representation: representation as speaking for and re-presentation as a portrait of how we view the Other. Both representation and re-presentation, however, are problematic. The former silences the voices of subaltern women and simultaneously erases their agency while the latter definition presents inaccurate images of subaltern women that reflect cultural bias.

to which they rightfully belong. Doing so, however, is exploitative in that it robs Indigenous nations and cultures of the credit and respect that they deserve.

In “To the Indigenous Woman,” RedCorn opts for a more diluted sense of humour, which is manifested in his use of irony and sarcasm. For example, in offering restitutions to the many Indigenous women who have experienced violence, he says, “For the woman and her baby left for dead by the police in her home, / while they gave a ride to her attacker back to his house....” Irony emerges in these lines through the way in which the police, as an institution, are supposed to serve and protect the public and also deliver criminals into the hands of the law; yet, in this particular situation, the police do just the opposite: they help the attacker while leaving the woman he attacks to suffer further. More than this, these lines speak to the way in which systematic failures allow violence against Indigenous women to persist. In other parts of the poem, RedCorn uses sarcasm when he discusses the many people who are complicit in the violence committed against Indigenous women. He says, “Thank you. / You make all of this possible. / We couldn't fail these women without your help.” Sarcasm emerges, then, in RedCorn’s thanking men for allowing violence against Indigenous women to persist, though he is obviously not thankful. Instead, his use of sarcasm is meant to be a gibe at both the men who commit violence against Indigenous women and those who allow it to happen.

That said, there is a stark difference in the humour that RedCorn deploys in his other work compared to that which he uses in “To the Indigenous Woman.” He opts for a different, more diffused sense of humour, I argue, for two reasons: to mimic the poetic traditions of Indigenous women and to underpin the seriousness and severity of violence committed against Indigenous women. Gould asserts that Indigenous women’s ability to “cling to ‘the knowledge of continuance’ allows [them] to write not only with grief but also with ‘sanity, balance, and humour’...often that humour is ironic” (812). As discussed in the paragraph above, RedCorn employs irony to highlight the way in which systematic failures contribute to the violence committed against Indigenous women. His use of a literary tradition often used by Indigenous women in their poetry draws a parallel between his work and the work of Indigenous women writers. As a result, RedCorn seeks to not only write a poem about Indigenous women, but he also attempts to write in the same way that many Indigenous women write about themselves.

Moreover, RedCorn’s decision to dilute his humour in “To the Indigenous Woman” goes hand in hand with the nature of the topic. While issues such as cultural appropriation can be joked about, violence against Indigenous women is far more somber a topic. To joke about such an issue would be to subscribe to rape culture, which Mohadesa Najumi explains “condon[es] and normalize[es] physical, emotional and sexual terrorism against women and girls and marginalized subjects. It produc[es] and [maintains an] environment where sexual assault is so *normative* that people ultimately believe that rape is inevitable” (para. 2). Further, RedCorn’s decision not to use lighthearted humour in “To the Indigenous Woman” creates a more serious tone—a tone that is the most appropriate for the severity of this issue. In order to avoid reproducing rape culture and instead convey the seriousness of violence committed against Indigenous women, RedCorn opts out of the jesting humour that he deploys in

his other work.

Similar to RedCorn's other work, however, "To the Indigenous Woman" functions, in several ways, as a form of resistance and political activism. Firstly, his employment of spoken word poetry speaks to the oral traditions that are both prevalent and important in Indigenous cultures. Victor Montejo asserts that for Indigenous peoples, oral traditions are essential for maintaining cultural identity because they are used to pass on norms, sacred beliefs, and knowledge; they serve didactic, religious, political and artistic functions within the community (139). By extension, oral traditions allow Indigenous peoples to connect the past to the present while also projecting to the future (139). In contrast, Western ways of thinking espouse written traditions. That is, in order for information to be considered valuable and legitimate, it must take the form of a written text, which includes but is not limited to books and essays. This way of thinking, J. Edward Chamberlin argues,

Discredit[s] the oral traditions of colonized Indigenous peoples, often in ways that have deeply damaged their viability....Thus, people are inclined to think of oral traditions as less evolved than written traditions and of communities in which oral traditions flourish as correspondingly less developed – socially, culturally, and perhaps emotionally and intellectually. (139)

Rather than conforming to Western ways of thinking that place value on written traditions, RedCorn uses spoken word poetry to inform and educate both Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations about violence against Indigenous women. By doing so, he reinforces the value of oral traditions while simultaneously challenging the superiority of Western ways of thinking that only espouse written traditions. "To the Indigenous Woman," then, operates as a site of resistance through the way in which RedCorn refuses to conform to Western ways of thinking and instead reinforces Indigenous cultural practices and beliefs. As a result, RedCorn reclaims Indigenous voice, which has been and continues to be silenced.

In another way, RedCorn challenges the value that Western ways of thinking place on written traditions by using visual techniques within the film that accompanies his poem, "To the Indigenous Woman," to strengthen a message that is only implicitly suggested in the words of the poem. The film begins in black and white then gradually moves into full colour which seemingly represents the idea of change and progress. Black and white film is an antiquated medium in which images are created through the contrast between these two colours. The binaric properties of black and white film—that is, the image is composed of either black parts or white parts—is indicative of dichotomous colonial ideology that associates Whiteness with characteristics such as civilization and spirituality while Indigeneity is associated with characteristics such as primitiveness and savagery. Once RedCorn dispels the myths surrounding violence committed against Indigenous women by exposing the systematic failures that allow for this violence to persist and subsequently proclaims "we fail them," the video that accompanies "To the Indigenous Woman" instantaneously gains colour. RedCorn, then,

uses visual techniques, specifically the use of colour, to reinforce the decolonization of Western ideology regarding Indigenous women and the violence that is disproportionately committed against them. Because film was once entirely black and white but has moved into full colour with the progression of time, the visual techniques that RedCorn employs in his film suggest a progression that is only possible once we change our way of thinking. Therefore, RedCorn's filmic techniques in "To the Indigenous Woman" are significant in two ways: the meaning behind his use of black and white film which gradually moves into full colour challenges the emphasis placed on written traditions by Western ideology as the only source of knowledge since this idea is not apparent in the written version of the poem alone. The black and white portion of the film symbolizes the limiting and archaic binaries espoused by Western ways of thinking that suggest Whiteness is inherently superior while Indigeneity is inherently inferior. The film's gradual movement into colour, then, symbolizes a moving forward in time and thinking that has the potential to end the violence committed against Indigenous women. As such, RedCorn's "To the Indigenous Woman" can be read, and perhaps watched, as a form of resistance and political activism.

Moreover, RedCorn's "To the Indigenous Woman" operates as a form of political activism because it raises awareness about violence against Indigenous women while also advocating for change. "To the Indigenous Woman" was initially published on the website of the Indian Law Resource Center. The ILRC published "To the Indigenous Woman" in order to raise awareness and help end the epidemic of violence against Indigenous women in the United States. RedCorn begins his poem by explaining the various systematic failures that allow for violence against Indigenous women to persist. He says, "To the Indigenous woman / I'm sorry we have not fought harder for you / I am the dysfunctional man." He continues with,

To doctors without clues,
For say nothing neighbors,
Do nothing attorneys,
And quiet parents with no memories,
Thank you.
You make all of this possible.
We couldn't fail these women without your help.

These lines speak to the way in which Indigenous women have been and continue to be failed not only by the men who commit violence against them, but also by family members, neighbours, and social institutions. This point is especially important to make because the mainstream media often criminalizes and demonizes Indigenous women (see fig. 1).

Vulnerability Factors -Murdered

(For all police jurisdictions in Canada)

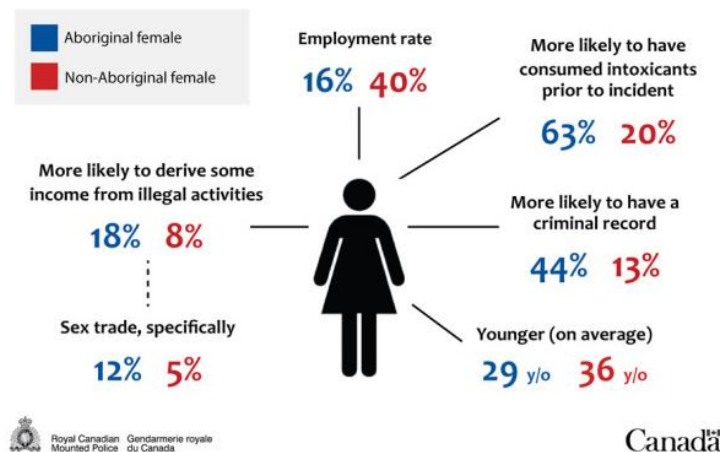


Fig. 1. Royal Canadian Mounted Police. 2014.

For example, the above diagram was published by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) in their 2014 report “Missing and Murdered Aboriginal Women: A National Operational Overview.” Though this report was published publicly, its goal was to “guide Canadian Police operational decision-making on a solid foundation ... [including] more targeted crime prevention and enhanced accountability for criminal investigations” (3). However, how Indigenous women are represented here is inherently problematic. This diagram shows that Indigenous women are more likely to be unemployed, engage in criminal activity, work in the sex trade, and consume intoxicants as if this somehow justifies the violence committed against them. Not only that, this diagram fails to take into account the systematic issues—mainly histories of colonization and patterns of racism and sexism—that result in the rates of unemployment, criminal activity, sex trade engagement, and substance consumption being more prevalent amongst Indigenous women. What this diagram does, though, much like other media, is criminalize Indigenous women and thereby reduce the seriousness and severity of the violence committed against them.

Further, RedCorn goes on to tell us that “For every 1000 Native women in your district, / 330 of them will be sexually assaulted, / 88% of the perpetrators will be non-Native.” By citing these numbers, he illustrates the severity of this epidemic. While many individuals may be under the impression that violence against Indigenous women is mainly committed at the hands of Indigenous men and is therefore an intracultural issue, RedCorn dispels this myth. The fact that 33% of Indigenous women will be sexually assaulted demonstrates how widespread this epidemic is; it also calls us to question why violence against Indigenous women specifically is so prevalent. More, the fact that violence against Indigenous women is not only committed by Indigenous men demonstrates the larger systematic failures and systems of oppressions that allow such violence to occur. RedCorn, then, dedicates the first half of “To the Indigenous Woman” to educating his audience about the epidemic. By discussing the various systematic failures that allow for violence against Indigenous women to persist, the perpetrators of

this violence, and the frequency of this violence, RedCorn dispels a number of myths relating to this epidemic. In doing so, he educates the public and raises awareness about violence against Indigenous women, and this in itself is a form of political activism.

Additionally, in "To the Indigenous Woman," RedCorn advocates for change. He says,

I dare you to protect them Mr. President.
I dare you to make laws for them Mr. Senator.
I dare you try to stop me Tribal Chairman.
I dare you to go look for me Police Officer.
...
Tell me you have daughters,
Tell me you don't want this for them,
Tell me you won't joke about this with your friends,
Tell me you won't forget we talked,
Tell me you will do something,
Do something.

In these lines, RedCorn calls on society, as a collective, to come together and advocate for change. His calling on Mr. President, Mr. Senator, Tribal Chairman and Police Officer speaks to the structural changes that must happen so that Indigenous women are protected under the law rather than further victimized by it. More, RedCorn's use of the personal pronoun "you" paired with his request to "tell me" demonstrates that he is pleading with his listeners to act. In doing so, he places the onus on the public to raise awareness about violence against Indigenous women by encouraging others to discuss this issue with friends and by doing something, as a collective, about it. RedCorn's repetition of the words "do something" and his decision to end his poem with these words work to reinforce the idea that "To the Indigenous Woman" is a form of political activism because it advocates for change.

Although "To the Indigenous Woman" functions as a form of resistance and political activism since it challenges Western ideology, raises awareness about violence against Indigenous women, and encourages the public to help end this epidemic, an incongruity regarding female agency and autonomy exists between RedCorn's film and his words. The film that RedCorn has directed to accompany his poem depicts mainly women. While there are men in the video as well, they are not focalized in any scenes until after the women join hands in what appears to be a circle. In fact, the men in the film are only invited to enter the circle once the women have already joined hands. The men, then, are portrayed as secondary to the women. In choosing this visual strategy, RedCorn emphasizes the strength and resilience of Indigenous women by showing them coming together to support one another despite the violence committed against them. Further, the circle that the women form in the film is representative of a traditional Indigenous healing ceremony known as healing circles. As Carrie L. Heilbron and Mary Guttman assert, the healing circle is an empowering process that has provided Indigenous women with opportunities to address patterns of abuse while they are also

garnering strength and support from other women (4). In RedCorn's film, then, Indigenous women are represented as resistant to the trauma that the violence committed against them causes; they form a solidarity and actively work to rebuild themselves and reclaim their voices. Men, on the other hand, are represented sparingly and secondary to Indigenous women, which suggests that Indigenous women initiate their own healing, then invite men to join the process according to their terms. As a result, in RedCorn's film, Indigenous women emerge as active and autonomous beings despite the violence that is committed against them.

In contrast, the words of RedCorn's poem work to undermine the empowering representation of Indigenous women that he creates in his film. For one, RedCorn speaks about women solely in terms of their relation to men. Speaking, in part, as a woman, he says,

Under treaties of silence,
She whispered to me:
Please.
Please stop.
I am your wife.
I am your sister.
I am your mother.
I am your daughter.

In these lines, RedCorn characterizes women as wives, sisters, mothers, and daughters who belong to men. While Indigenous women may be some if not all of these things, they are not *only* these things—they are so much more. Indigenous women are warriors, fighters, and survivors who actively resist the systems of oppression that operate to silence and marginalize them. Above all, though, Indigenous women are human beings which should be enough reason in and of itself to not commit violence against them. By speaking about Indigenous women in terms of their relation to men, RedCorn reduces them to passive victims. Further, his use of the word "your" connotes a sense of ownership of Indigenous women and thereby objectifies them, an objectification which, in turn, can be used to justify the violence committed against them.

Furthermore, while in his film RedCorn shows Indigenous women initiating their own healing, the words of his poem suggest otherwise. In "To the Indigenous Woman," RedCorn calls only upon men to advocate for change through his referencing of Mr. President, Mr. Senator, and Tribal Chairman (see quotation on page 12). Additionally, in order to end violence against Indigenous women, RedCorn suggests that these women require protection from men. Again, speaking as a woman, he says,

You are supposed to protect me.
You are supposed to be a warrior.
Protect me from you,
From him,

From all of them.

These lines suggest that women are somehow weaker than men and therefore need their protection. In this way, RedCorn reinforces gender norms that present men as strong and active while women are weak and passive. Doing so, however, undermines the various ways in which Indigenous women actively resist the violence committed against them. What's more, when RedCorn says that men are supposed to be warriors, he presents men as these brave figures who can save women. Again, he reinforces gender binaries. RedCorn, perhaps unknowingly, exposes the contradiction in thinking that women need protection from men in order to end the epidemic of violence committed against them *by men* in saying "protect me from you." Indigenous women, however, do not require protection from men. Because violence against Indigenous women is committed mostly by men, men must seek to change themselves and the structures that allow for such violence to persist rather than trying to protect Indigenous women; if violence did not occur in the first place, there would be no need for protection.

Lastly, the way in which RedCorn reduces the agency and autonomy of Indigenous women reinforces paternalistic ideology, an act which is inherently problematic. He does this by suggesting that men are supposed to offer women the protection that they are in need of. However, this way of thinking essentially strengthens patriarchy since men hold all the power, including the power to tell women about women's issues, while women are largely excluded from positions of authority and control within society. Though RedCorn may have intended for "To the Indigenous Woman" to be a feminist text, his undermining of female agency and autonomy serves to reinforce the very same gender binaries that allow sexism to persist. Further, his characterization of Indigenous women as victims in need of male protection implies their helplessness and his pity, and this situation does not adequately describe the experiences of women who experience violence. Historically, Gwendolyn Wu argues, "people have associated the term 'victim' with being trapped, sometimes in reference to the cycle of domestic abuse" (para. 6). Depicting women as victimized, however, reduces their whole identity to being a victim. Suggesting that women are survivors, on the other hand, which Indigenous women are, implies that women are actively fighting—whether through the judicial system, to raise awareness about violence committed against Indigenous women, or to learn how to live after a violent act has been committed against them (Wu para. 5). Survivor is, therefore, a far more empowering term and categorization than "victim." When persons other than Indigenous women discuss the violence that is committed against Indigenous women, this distinction must be made clear. In "To the Indigenous Woman," however, RedCorn fails to do so, an absence which further problematizes this text.

In this essay, I have argued that Thomas Ryan RedCorn's "To the Indigenous Woman" combines spoken word and film to create a powerful tool of activism that raises awareness and advocates for change regarding violence committed against Indigenous women. I have also suggested that an incongruity seems to exist between the words of his poem and the visuals of his film, an incongruity which exposes the main

issue with this text. Though RedCorn's film works to empower women, his text works to circumscribe female agency and autonomy. As a result, men emerge as powerful saviours while women remain powerless victims. RedCorn's misrepresentation of Indigenous women in his poem reinforces why individuals must be cautious when they speak about a group of people to which they do not belong and in relation to which they are privileged. Therefore, in order to end this epidemic, it is not enough for men to simply protect women. Rather, a comprehensive, coordinated, and well-resourced national response is required to end the violence committed against Indigenous women (Amnesty International para. 1). Most importantly, this response must be developed with Indigenous women and girls and address their needs before anything else; it must also seek to undo the patterns of racist and sexist violence caused by colonization. In order to end the epidemic of violence committed against Indigenous women and foster healing amongst those affected by it, Indigenous women cannot be further victimized and silenced in these conversations. Rather, their voices and experiences must be placed at the forefront of the discussion surrounding the violence committed against them.

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